

First-person memories stay sharper longer, research suggests

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Our ability to edit our memories allows us to grow and change how we perceive ourselves and our experiences, says U of A psychology researcher.

The perspective through which we recall our memories—seeing them through our own eyes as a participant or seeing ourselves in them as a third-party observer—can affect the vividness and potency of the memory, according to a research review by a University of Alberta psychology professor.

Peggy St. Jacques said the research indicates people who recall their memories as a participant—or in the first person—have stronger recollection.

"If memory was simply an exact recollection of our experiences, one would think we would recall our early memories from the [first-person perspective](#)," said St. Jacques. "But recalling a memory is not like watching a film of what happened. We edit and modify memories each time we recall them."

Studies have shown this can affect how we later

recall memories, noted St. Jacques.

"Viewing memories in the third person tends to reduce the vividness of that experience, as well as the amount of emotion we feel. Our memory system is very dynamic and flexible."

That's probably a good thing, St. Jacques explained. Our ability to edit our memories allows us to grow and change how we perceive ourselves and our experiences. For example, by changing the way we feel about a troubling memory, we're able to learn and move forward—something that can help people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

But that same ability can also mean the memories we recall in the third person may not be as authentic as we might think, St. Jacques said.

"It's possible because you're not recalling that experience through your [own eyes](#) that the memory is distorted in some way," she said. "There could be some aspects that are false or edited."

Using virtual reality

If our memories are influenced by the perspective we use to recall them, what does that mean for experiences we see for the first time in third person? That's one question St. Jacques is exploring using [virtual reality](#) technology.

"Virtual reality allows us to have immersive experiences that seem really real to us but that we experience in the third person," she said. "In our lab, we're using virtual reality to look at how experiences of virtual environments in first and third person impact people's memories."

"Our working hypothesis is that, after a delay, if you've formed memories from a third-person [perspective](#), the [memory](#) will not be as durable and will tend to lose vividness over time."

The study, "A New Perspective on Visual Perspective in Memory," was published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

More information: Peggy L. St. Jacques. A New Perspective on Visual Perspective in Memory, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (2019).
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